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Parents of 29 are used to big holiday celebrations

 By **LINDA GITTLEMAN**

Gratiot Managing Editor

Two turkeys, an even dozen pies and 20 pounds of potatoes are on the Thanksgiving menu for the Roy Denman family of Vestaburg when about 45 people are expected for today's dinner.

"It's not a big deal," said Jeanne Denman, wife and mom. "I do it all the time."

Indeed she does.

Jeanne, a retired waitress, and her husband Roy, retired from Hitachi and a former policeman, are the parents of 29 kids.

As the Denmans will cheerfully tell you, "Three are our biological children. The other 26 are adopted."

Nearly half of those kids are grown up and on their own, but 15 of them, ages 5 to 21, are still at home. Two of those are in college. And each child has his or her own separate bedroom.

"We have two portable schoolhouses added to the house," Roy explained about their large, rambling home out in the country.

Married in 1966, Roy, 59, and Jeanne, 57, became foster parents after they became



Jeannie Denman, at right, holds onto Dalton, while Roy talks with Lydia and Toby during dinner for the family of 16 in their home near Vestaburg. (Sun photo by Victor Fitzsimons)


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the biological parents of two girls and a boy. Their son wanted a brother.

"We talked with people and they said you should do foster care," Jeanne said. "We were young and inexperienced and we didn't know what we were getting into."

After taking in troubled kids - mostly teens - they had one boy who didn't want to leave but was taken away. Difficulty with the foster care system eventually turned them to adoption.

The Denmans have adopted whole families - three boys from Texas and four kids from Ohio. Later they added two more siblings from that Ohio family.

Some of their children are challenged in some way; one son is autistic, for example, a daughter has Down's Syndrome. Other kids have no challenges.

When the Denmans adopted an African American child years ago, they wanted another one.

"But they kept sending us white ones," she said, noting that they eventually did get more.

Jeanne remembered one particular time several years ago when she received a call from a Lansing agency and was asked to take in a teenage girl and her newborn infant. Jeanne said she told them no, they didn't want a baby. Still, the agency called repeatedly and she kept saying no.

She was quite firm about it.

But then one night there was a knock on the door and outside stood a Roman Catholic nun with the teenager and her baby.

"Well, how do you say no to a nun?" Jeanne asked.

The baby was just five days old when she arrived and the Denmans ended up adopting her when she was about 3 years old. It sometimes takes that long, especially when the birth mother isn't sure she wants to give her child up. That baby is now grown up.

Since they only arrived this past Halloween, three of their kids are still in the process of being adopted.

Why do the Denmans do it?

"Because we're mentally impaired," she joked. "Because everyone deserves to be loved. We sure don't do it for the money."

As an experienced foster mother as well as a "regular mom," the worst part of taking in older, troubled kids is when they lie, steal and cheat "and there's no place to go for help. One hour of counseling is not going to help these kids."

When her adopted kids get into trouble and are sent to a detention center, "we have to pay for it." And through the years, they have paid plenty - tens of thousands of dollars.

On the other hand, what makes it all worthwhile is, "when you see them change - when you see them not have to be on medicine and become productive," she said. "You can really see that change."

Roy explained that since so many of their kids come from public institutions, they are often medicated so that they are easier to control. It's up to the Denmans to wean them off those drugs.

When it comes to feeding the kids, "I buy ahead and I buy on sale. I sometimes buy at Gordon Foods. We don't have junk food. No potato chips. No pop. And we hardly have any cavities."

The Denmans use three gallons of milk a day and about 25 loaves of bread a week. On occasion they go out to eat - maybe for some Chinese food or pizza. It takes eight pizzas to feed the family.

The kids make their own breakfasts in the morning, usually cereal, and they take turns doing the dishes.

All the teenagers do their own laundry but, "it never ends," Jeanne said. "I do four loads a day."

Lots of television sets fill the house - especially in the TV room, which is also equipped with an Xbox and different games. Computer use is diligently monitored.

When she shops for clothing she only buys when the stores have a "75 percent off" sale. And at that time, she'll usually buy about 75 pieces of clothing. Even the school will call her if they find a child without a winter coat. School officials know she's likely to have an extra jacket or two.

For Christmas, it's easier if the Denmans just rent a hall.

"Everyone comes then - aunts, uncles, cousins," she said.

The kids will help decorate the tree at home and provide a list of things they'd like for Christmas.

"They usually pick out games and CDs," she said. "We only buy for the kids that live with us. It's too much otherwise."

When you adopt that many kids, "You give up your life," Jeanne said. "We don't have friends. Nobody asks us over to their house. You don't want 15 kids coming too."

Even though the Denmans have had troubled kids, some with serious problems, most are "wonderful children. On the whole, the kids are doing very well for themselves."

And sometimes the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. One of their daughters has adopted a Korean girl and is in the process of adopting a boy who is paralyzed from his chest down.

"That I won't do," she said. "They have to be able to dress themselves."

The Denmans have 25 grandchildren and four great grandchildren and they've likely got a long way to go. Jeanne said she wouldn't rule out the possibility of adopting more.

It's funny what happens when a new young face pops through the door, she said.

"It feels like they've always been here," she said.

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